
Identity.

Meet Christmas Goddess Perchta, a Belly-Slitting, Half-Woman Demon

If you were naughty, Perchta would enter your home while you slept, disembowel you, and stuff the cavity with rocks.



By Mary McGill

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SOMEONE IN A MASK FOR PERCHTENLAUF, A CHRISTMAS PROCESSION FOR FOLLOWERS OF PERCHTA. PHOTO BY HIGH CONTRAST VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS, PHOTO OF THE ALPS BY AKELA - FROM ALP TO ALP VIA STOCKSY

Christmas lore usually comes in the shape of a jolly red-suited man winding a sleigh through the starry night sky with his trusty band of reindeer. There are, however, some holiday figures who are much more ominous—chief among them the belly-slitting, child-abducting, half-woman, half-demon Alpine monster known as Perchta.

According to old Austro-German legend, Perchta is a malevolent pagan goddess who stalks the snowy landscape by night during the Twelve Days of Christmas. Like Italy's Christmas witch, La Befana, she is also associated with the Feast of the Epiphany on 6 January. Perchta's aim is simple and chilling: to ensure local customs are upheld under the pain of death. In bygone times, this meant no weaving during the holidays, unless you dared to incur Perchta's wrath—and what a wrath she had.

tradition of eating goose at Christmas.

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An Arranged Marriage Ceremony with Romania's Teen Witches



Folklorist John B. Smith writes that Perchta’s earliest incarnation, dating from the Middle Ages, was as “the enforcer of communal taboos.” This initially meant punishing

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It's a sentiment echoed by author and independent scholar Stephen Morris, who has written about Perchta. "I think my favorite [story] is when she intrudes on a wedding reception she was not invited to attend," he says. "[It] sounds like the Wicked Fairy in Sleeping Beauty, right? She curses the bride and groom and the whole wedding party by transforming them into wolves."

Frightening tales of Perchta are certainly entertaining, but there is more to her legend than horror and mayhem. "I first heard about Perchta in a book of German fairytales," Rebecca Beyer tells me. She is a forager-witch and a scholar of Appalachian folklore and magic who feels a strong connection to Perchta. "I find any creature or goddess figure that holds an aspect of terror interesting. She is one of the many dual-faced goddesses,

Percha's legend stretches back hundreds of years but her popularity shows no sign of diminishing. In Austria and elsewhere, she remains a very visible part of Christmas festivities. A perfect example is the Perchtenlauf, which, as Beyer explains "is a masked procession full of noise-making, fireworks and people, generally men, dressed as terrible beasts with large horns. These *perchent* or followers of Perchta, serve to frighten away the cold, evil spirits of winter by out ugly-ing them.

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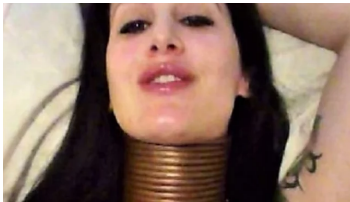
"They are so fearsome themselves they aim to scare the very cold away. There were well documented attempts at suppression in the 17th and 18th centuries, but today, these processions have experienced a revival. We're even seeing these in America now, which delights me, and I'd love to have one in Asheville, NC where I live someday."

Each year, Beyer marks the Epiphany by preparing one of Perchta's favourite meals. "I personally enjoy leaving out a meal of oat gruel and herring for her on 6 January, and having some myself in her honor," she says. "I also enjoy creating art and imagery of her to honor her, so she does not become a forgotten goddess." It is a sentiment shared by many every Christmas, wherever Perchta and her terrifying deeds are celebrated.

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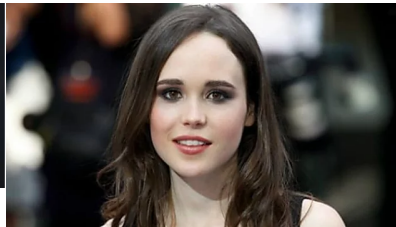
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